

excerpted from CHAPTER 3

MATTERS OF STYLE

*I love smooth words, like gold-enameled fish
Which circle slowly with a silken swish.
—Elinor Wylie*

Of the thousands of personal essays I've read over the past 15 years, one of my favorite introductions is from an application to law school, and it opens thus:

My interest in the law began with donuts. As a child, I developed early persuasive skills during family disagreements on how to divide boxes of the treats. My parents belonged to the “biggest people deserve the most donuts” school of thought; while as the youngest family member, I was a devout believer in the “one person, one donut” principle. The debates were often cutthroat, but when it came to donut distribution, I sought justice at any cost.

This opening, taking from a sample essay in the book, *Perfect Personal Statements* (10), isn't just effective because of its cleverness. It's also efficient in detail, humorous and surprising in delivery, focused in theme, universal in appeal, and even moralistic in meaning. This writer is concerned with justice, even at an early age when decisions of right and wrong could be reduced to the distribution of donuts. Obviously, the paragraph that follows the opening discusses justice at a more advanced level, and gradually this law school applicant addresses social issues such as poverty, nationalism, and prejudice, and he emphasizes his passion to address them through law. As he later sums up near the close of his essay: “My identity rests on these convictions” (10).

This example shows just how much can be accomplished in even a short personal essay by the introduction alone. It also demonstrates that stylistic creativity is not

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always about flashy word choice or complex sentencings—sometimes the best style is the most artfully simplistic, the most pithy. Whatever else readers think of the content of a personal essay, if they can take delight in the style, they are more likely to assess the writer as worthy of being read and re-read, and thus more likely to plop the application into the acceptance pile.

This chapter is about helping you write stylish personal essays, with an understanding that style is revealed through everything from mechanical correctness to efficiency of presentation to nuances of tone. Put simply, to write with style is to invite and earn your reader's respect.

*Art thou a pen, whose task shall be
To drown in ink, what writers think?
Oh, wisely write, that pages white
Be not the worse for ink and thee!*
—Ethel Lynn Beers

Common Stylistic Concerns

Like the resume, the personal statement has evolved to the point where there are both built-in and commonly used stylistic devices as well as room for individuality and creativity. And as with the resume, there are appropriate ways to word certain material and there are certain risks not worth taking. The very language you use and the rhetorical approach you take can be guided by the informed practices of others.

Using Formalities and Generic Phrases

Many writers feel the need to use excessive formalities and niceties within personal statements, partly because they've seen others do so and partly because they worry that the weight of the occasion calls for refined or austere language. Thus, we find statements such as the following in personal essays, often in the opening or closing:

It is with great pride and deep respect that I hereby do apply for the honor of the Rhodes Scholarship. Herewith you will find my complete application materials. I sincerely hope that the graduate committee of

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Mythic University deems my application worthy of full consideration so that I may contribute to a program already deserving of its national reputation.

The problem with these examples should be painfully obvious. In the first case, the committee already knows what applicants are seeking so the generic sentences become useless; in the second case, an elliptical construct, the writer unintentionally insults readers, as though they might not give every application equal consideration or as if they are unaware of their program's own reputation.

Avoid such mannerly drivel. Instead, assume a respectful, individual tone throughout your writing, and trust that you will be treated both respectfully and individually. When tempted towards formalities, take a cue from some of the writers showcased in Chapter 5, whose formal comments on their fit for their respective scholarships are both meaningful and self-reflective, as follows:

I look forward to the challenges that this project presents as well as the opportunities for further maturation as a practicing scientist.

Ensnoring myself in British culture, intellectual environment, and vigorous research at Oxford is the chance of a lifetime. I hope to be able to seize it.

Effective Jargon and Informality

In general, jargon is underrated. Jargon—the specialized language of a discipline—is so often overused or used poorly that it gets a bad rap. However, to use jargon economically and effectively is to show that you are an “insider,” comfortable with the vocabulary and discourse of your field of study. To create written context where jargon is the natural choice also promotes an efficiency of understanding and a direct connection with the reader. For instance, in the sample essay from biological science in Chapter 4 (pages 101-107), note the economy of using the term “invasives” instead of “pest species that invade an area.” In a later essay from a military pilot in the same chapter (pages 108-109), note how terms such as “biplanes” and acronyms such as NGA and GIS almost suggest that the writer is having an informed, relaxed conversation within a specialized community—thus there is no need to define simple specialized terms that the

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audience can readily understand. These writers use jargon to save their readers time and to communicate directly and professionally.

At the same time, it's possible to converse informally in order to 1) facilitate clear narrative, 2) to involve yourself as a character in the action, or 3) to provide contrast to the denser surrounding material. In the essay just cited written by a military pilot, the writer refers to "challenges [he] faced as an undergrad," notes that he "can do little to affect Congressional funding," and wryly comments, "I don't expect the military to begin training squadrons of GIS wizards." Here, the writer shows the courage to be plain speaking and informal, sending the message that he can comfortably shoot from the hip.

Of course, both jargon and informalities can be overused and be inappropriate for your target audience, and if readers feel that jargon is used only to impress or that informalities turn too colloquial, they will only be annoyed by your style. But manage both jargon and informalities sparingly and with purpose and your audience will barely notice—they'll be too busy reading comfortably.

Using Narrative and Anecdotes

Compact stories and nifty narratives, especially in the opening of a personal statement, can communicate efficiently and creatively with your readers, while

When I received my first microscope set at the age of eight, I couldn't wait to swab the inside of my cheek and smear my cells on a slide.

potentially providing welcome relief during the reading of hundreds of application essays that strongly resemble each other. Some stories put us right in the moment alongside the writer:

"When I received my first microscope set at the age of eight, I couldn't wait to swab the inside of my cheek and smear my cells on a slide." Others invite us directly into the writer's mind: "I remember thinking about the long, cold nights that Edwin Hubble spent staring into the telescope at the Mt. Wilson Observatory." Still others surprise us and create a bit of suspense: "Some protestors around me carried large flashlights; I clutched a bullhorn."

These examples, all imbedded within personal essays written by students, represent how writers used narrative snippets to engage and inform the reader. Note how these examples do more than just narrate—they also underscore the

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writer's passion for a field of study or a commitment to a cause. When you use small tales to capture our attention, be sure they are both relevant and revealing, so that we're impressed not just with your ability to tell a quick story, but also your desire to tell a meaningful one.

Avoiding Cuteness and Gimmicks

Especially when using narrative or setting your sights on originality, it can be easy to lapse into a mode that is merely trite and cute. Such a lapse is critiqued by the Dean of Admissions at the UCLA School of Law as follows:

Humor is fine; it's a welcome break, as long as it is actually humorous. I hate seeing essays that begin with something like: "In the matter before the court of UCLA, regarding the admission of . . ." Everyone who uses this approach thinks it's unique, but it's not (10).

Other misguided gimmicks that a surprising number of writers attempt when writing personal essays:

- Listing the impressive icons—probably long since dead—who have graduated from your school, blatantly placing yourself amongst their ranks. This may be good PR for your institution, but it's bad PR for you.
- Sprinkling your essay with 50-cent vocabulary, obviously aided by a thesaurus. Choose the best word for the circumstances, not the fanciest.
- Bleeding your heart all over the page, as though your compassion or sensibilities or literary muscles have simply overtaken the writing process. I've seen students write about "dripping in agony" over an exam, or "languishing with deep-infested guilt" while watching a hungry child eat a meal.
- Referring to yourself throughout the essay in the third person and telling some tragic or heroic tale, then revealing that the essay's humble protagonist is (surprise) indeed you.

There are also gimmicks of form, as discussed in the book *Perfect Personal Statements* (10): medical school applicants submitting essays in the form of a diagnosis; applicants who submit essays in leather binding, on parchment scrolls, or written in calligraphy; business school applicants with essays structured like a corporate prospectus.

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Such gimmicks are meant to be cute, obviously, but it is doubtful that a selection committee would find them to be anything but odd. In fact, readers would likely question your suitability for graduate study if you stoop to gimmickry. To put it bluntly but truthfully: children and puppies are cute; grad students are not.

Look with favour upon a bold beginning.
—Virgil

Creative Beginnings and Calculated Risks

Without question, the most common place for writers to exercise their freedom in personal statements, as well as the most common place where writers feel uncertain about what they've done, is in their beginnings. Even personal statements that are scientific in tone and content might have creative beginnings. Although there's nothing wrong with a straightforward opening simply stating your purpose, especially if you have just one page for your essay, most writers take a bolder tack. Readers of personal statements are used to openings that tell stories or borrow quotations, essays that discuss relevant current events, and even daring writers who risk a bit of well-conceived humor or surprise.

Personal Stories

The most common creative beginning, a personal story tells a tale by briefly setting a scene, often capturing some formative moment of your past when your interest in your course of study blossomed. Whether setting the scene in a classroom or on a mountaintop, remember that your goal is make readers feel they are there with you, and remember that the setting itself can be a character in your "short story"—influencing both the action and a response to that action.

Here is a perfect example of a lengthy creative beginning that winds its way into a formal thesis statement, excerpted from a Rhodes Scholarship essay in Chapter 5 (pages 174-175):

Soaked in sweat, I sat deep in thought on the small mound of sand and broken rocks in northern Kenya, where 1.7 million years ago a desperately ill Homo erectus woman had died. Her death had entranced me for years.

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KNM-ER 1808 had died of Hypervitaminosis A, wherein an overdose of Vitamin A causes extensive hemorrhaging throughout the skeleton and excruciating pain. Yet a thick rind of diseased bone all over her skeleton—ossified blood clots—tells that 1808 lived for weeks, even months, immobilized by pain and in the middle of the African bush. As noted in *The Wisdom of the Bones*, by Walker and Shipman, that means that someone had cared for her, brought her water, food, and kept away predators. At 1.7 million years of age, 1808's mere pile of bones is a breathtaking, poignant glimpse of how people have struggled with disease over the ages. Since that moment two summers ago, I've been fascinated by humans' relationship with disease. I want to research paleopathology, the study of ancient diseases, in relation to human culture, specifically sex and gender.

Note how this opening confidently integrates technical detail and even slips in an informal citation on the journey to the thesis. Here, setting itself acts as a character, moving our story's protagonist to imagine a woman's long-ago death, and we also recognize the writer's seriousness of purpose about her work as she as a character in the tale contemplates the woman's fate from a "small mound of sand and broken rocks in northern Kenya." Just as she was taken to this important place and moment in her life, we are taken with her through narrative.

Other essays open with much briefer and less fiction-like personal stories, sometimes relying on just one line to set the context, with the writer heading to a purpose statement shortly thereafter. Here are some straightforward but artful beginnings to personal statements in the book *Graduate Admissions Essays* (9):

I attended seventeen different schools before high school.

I spent the morning of my eighteenth birthday in an auditorium with two hundred strangers.

Radio has been my passion for as long as I can remember.

Clearly, the style of an opening that shares a personal story can range from the flashy to the plain—what matters most is that the opening truly is *personal*.

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Compelling Quotations

Like many writers and readers, I'm a sucker for a good meaty quotable quote, which is part of why quotations are used to open each major section of this

Some find Forrest Gump's "Life is like a box of chocolates" hilarious; others just groan when they hear it.

handbook. We tape handwritten quotes on our bathroom mirrors, clip them onto the visors in our cars, and paste them into our e-mail signature lines. In a personal essay, not only do

quotes set context for the reader, they also allow you to ride on the broad shoulders of another who actually managed to say or write something that was *worth* quoting. Quotations might be used at the start of the essay, in the closing, or they might appear at a key moment within the body as a way to set context or emphasize a point. In Chapter 5 of this handbook, a quotation is used as an opening to a science-related essay by an applicant for a National Science Foundation Fellowship. In the same chapter, another writer uses a narrative opening in her essay to repeat a favorite quote that her mother used to say: "To find out where you're going, you need to know where home is."

Keep in mind that some quotations are highly overused and that quotations can also come off as merely trite and silly, depending on the taste of the reader. Some find Forrest Gump's "Life is like a box of chocolates" hilarious; others just groan when they hear it. If using a quotation, be sure that you're not just propping yourself up on it as an apology for a lack of substance to your text. Comment on the quotation's relevance to your life rather than just let it sit there, and choose the most meaningful quote for the circumstances rather than one that simply tickles your fancy.

The Use of Surprise or Humor

Indeed, the weapon of surprise is a key ingredient in a Monty Python skit about the Spanish Inquisition (no one expects it, just in case you forgot). But in a personal statement humor and surprise can fall flat in the hands of a fumbling writer. Nevertheless, some writers take these calculated risks, and do so with style. Witness this passage from a sample essay in Chapter 4 (pages 98-100), as a film student explains how he spent his freshman year in a different major:

With a high school education grounded rigorously in math and science, I entered Mythic University on an academic scholarship with Polymer

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Science and Engineering as my intended major. I like to joke that, after seeing Mike Nichols' film *The Graduate* and hearing that terrific line, "plastics," delivered poolside to a wayward Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman), I was inadvertently led into the hands of the great polymer Satan. But, by sophomore year, I quickly escaped the plastic devil's clasp and found a new home in the film department.

Here, this student uses self-deprecating humor as many do in the personal statement: to explain what might otherwise look like a curiosity in his background. Readers need not question his devotion to film despite his beginning in the sciences—he even blends the two interests together by being influenced into his initial major *by* a film, aligning himself briefly and humorously with the hapless character of Benjamin Braddock.

Others use humor or surprise less expansively, but again with the purpose of revealing something personal and intentional self-commentary. One writer quips that his high school classmates voted him "Most likely to have a publishable resume" (10), which shows that this writer can simultaneously poke fun at and uplift himself. Another writer opens her essay unconventionally with a surprising admission—"Skeletons. Like everyone else I have some hanging in my closet" (9)—then later reveals herself as a "survivor of sexual assault." Here, the writer's tone is surprisingly frank, which under the circumstances could help her be viewed as mature and courageous.

Perhaps what unifies these disparate approaches is that the writers clearly *know* they are taking a risk with their rhetoric—there's nothing accidental or highly cutesy about it. All of them reveal a passion for their chosen fields, and the humor and surprise are attention-getting without being too distracting.

Perhaps a good rule of thumb is this: If using humor or surprise, aim it squarely at yourself without making yourself look silly or undermining your character, and dispense with it quickly rather than push it over the top. No matter how well you tell a joke, some readers may not care for it. And hard as it may be to believe, not everyone likes, or even *gets*, Monty Python.

Topical Context

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It's often said that one of the best ways to prepare for an interview for a national scholarship is to read *The New York Times* and be ready to discuss current events.

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If you make it to the interview selection, it's already clear that you have an excellent academic record and look good on paper. What's unclear is how you present in person. By showing

yourself to be not just committed to your field but also knowledgeable about the world, you paint yourself as a mature thinker, an informed citizen, a responsible student of life.

In a personal statement, writers typically create topical context by narrating a recent event of some consequence, citing a respected source, or simply establishing an arena for discussion. "Martial arts and medicine," opens one personal essay (8), using an intentional sentence fragment to grab our attention and crisply define two intertwined themes in the writer's life. Other essays create a sense of weightiness to their subject matter through topical references:

As I write this statement, Governor Mario Cuomo makes preparations to vacate the Executive Mansion in Albany, New York, after New Yorkers rejected his appeal for another term (10).

As the United States launched yet another small war in a distant corner of the globe, Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen returned to life and captivated a hometown audience in Pekin, Illinois, with the folksy eloquence that made him nationally famous (9).

As these politically savvy allusions show, writers who use topical references impress upon their readers that they are both informed and concerned. Here, the color of one's political stripes is irrelevant—what matters is that they are painted clearly. Whether employing a political reference or citing a current event, when you create topical context you represent yourself as a keen observer of the world.

If you wish to converse with me, define your terms.
—Voltaire

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*excerpted from CHAPTER 4
SAMPLE PERSONAL STATEMENTS,
APPLICATION ESSAYS, AND RESUMES*

*Easy writing makes hard reading.
—Ernest Hemingway*

As a graduate student taking fiction writing workshops many moons ago, I recall what was most motivating to me as a creative writer. It wasn't the reading of published or award-winning work, and it wasn't the classroom critique given on high from the professor nor the scribble from my classmates on my manuscripts—all these things were helpful and valuable, but nothing motivated me more than comparing my fiction to the work of my peers. As I read their work carefully, both objectively and subjectively, I found myself thinking that I was sure I could write better than the others around me at the seminar table—then I'd read an artful, poignant story that made me wonder whether I could ever even compete.

Perhaps somewhere between these two attitudes is the most profitable approach when studying the work of your peers. In critiquing the work of others who essentially represent your competition, you should take a respectful stance both critical and kind, just as selection committee members are likely to do. The samples in this chapter are opportunities for you to study, admire, question, emulate, reject, and—most importantly—consider how to present the best, truest, most effective picture of yourself in the eyes of others. These samples were chosen from a field of about 100 students because they represent personal stories that are intriguing, diverse, complex, honest, and humanizing.

For even further samples and advice, especially if you're interested in law, business, or medical school, I recommend *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School*, by Richard J. Stelzer (8), *Perfect Personal Statements*, by Mark Alan Stewart (10), and *Graduate Admissions Essays*, by Donald Asher (9).

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SHORT PERSONAL STATEMENT: PALEONTOLOGY

From an early age I was fascinated with fossils. My respect for ancient life has always included an admitted partiality for the study of vertebrates. Upon taking my first college-level paleontology class I knew without a doubt that I had chosen the right path. The study of fossils has never felt like unwarranted labor, but an opportunity to learn about these creatures that lived so long before our time. Throughout my geology coursework my ears have always pricked up at the mention of the word fossil. My college education has been a means to entering the study of vertebrate paleontology.

Naturally when the time to choose a thesis project came, I made sure that I would do mine in the field of paleontology, working directly with fossil specimens. My project involves the taphonomy, stratigraphy, and identification of a middle-Ordovician coral bioherm as well as its bryozoan constituents. The research is now well under way, involving many aspects of a sound paleontological study: sampling, analysis, identification, and finalization into a report. Fossiliferous rock samples were acquired from the field, cut at proper orientations, polished, and peel section slides produced from them. My analysis of these slides led to identification of the specimens utilizing the established literature. Fossil specimen photography will soon follow. The abstract from this research project has been submitted in time for the Northeastern Section Meeting of the Geological Society of America in March. From this project I will take away an understanding of how to conduct a proper paleontological study and I will write a thesis.

My aspirations for study in vertebrate paleontology are primarily in understanding what fossil specimens can tell us about how ancient vertebrates lived, interacted with their environment, and evolved through time. More specifically, my research interests within the field include employing morphology in the phylogenetic analysis of major evolutionary bifurcations such as that involving theropods and birds, exploiting biogeography to better understand vertebrate expansion and speciation, and the use of functional morphology and biomechanics to understand vertebrate movement. My long-term goals are to educate others and spur interest in vertebrate paleontology while conducting research. The position of professor would encompass these goals as well as allow me to publish and maintain a successful presence in the field.

The program at the University of Chicago would prepare me extremely well for what I ultimately intend to do in life. The works of professors within the Division of Biological Sciences, the Department of Geophysical Sciences, as well as the Field Museum are impressive. I appreciated meeting Dr. Paul C. Sereno during his visit at Mythic University in December 2004, and I find his approach toward exploration and his application of cladistics in phylogenetic studies indispensable to the field of vertebrate paleontological study. From this correspondence I feel the research that I would conduct at the university would not only be interesting and rewarding, but give me experience in the field to then apply toward my ultimate goal of becoming an academic professor.

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SHORT INTERNSHIP ESSAY: GEOGRAPHY

Prior to coming to Mythic College, I had a very skewed view of what geography was. When I thought about geography, visions of memorizing all fifty state capitals and exercises of filling in the world map came to mind. Freshman year, I enrolled in Geography 20 (human geography) simply because it was the only honors class that fit in my schedule. Instead of being bored, I was stimulated to think of the world through a different focus, through the lens of a geographer: to view people and places and examine how each relates to the other. Suddenly, I was thinking of everything in this fashion. When walking to class, I would ponder why the paths were designed the way they were and how this affected the different flows of traffic. I found that geography addresses my varied academic interests well. It offers me a balance of physical, social, and cultural studies. Therefore, it was a natural progression for me to pursue geography as a major.

Throughout my geography experience at Mythic College, I have gained skill in Geographic Information Sciences, which has given me great insight in many fields. For one, I obtained a greater understanding of how the US Census is calculated and this enabled me to be a more informed enumerator. Now, I find myself completely captivated by the various elements of geography and how they all are interwoven in a nexus of relations with historical, economic, physical, social, and cultural nodes. For my Honors Thesis next year, I will be exploring the Rothschild family to see how they fit within these various geographic realms. I am fascinated by how this family began as foreigners and within a few years was able to build a banking empire and become leaders in the economic world. As part of my thesis research, I intend to travel to the various cities where they lived and make observations on both economic and social grounds.

After I complete my undergraduate education in geography, I hope to work for an organization that incorporates geographical education and exploration. I hope to be able to write articles and essays that would be used to increase geographical awareness as well as educate people about lesser-known cultures in the world. I also intend on participating in the Peace Corps and speculate about earning a law degree.

I wish to participate in the Geography Intern Program with the National Geographic Society because, in short, it would be the fulfillment of my dream. It would enable me to work in an environment with people who share similar interests, providing me with an opportunity to contribute to a product that reaches a broad audience of people who subscribe to the magazine, visit Explorer's Hall, or glance through a National Geographic book. It would provide me with the practical experience that would aid me tremendously in pursuing my future goals, and reveal paths I might otherwise never discover.

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SHORT APPLICATION ESSAY: ENVIRONMENTAL LAW

My first personal introduction to the profusion of environmental laws in our country came while working for my father. I worked for over eleven years at my father's business, an Exxon Service Center. While there, I performed every job, task, and duty associated with the operation of a service station. One duty involved the maintenance of records for the underground storage tank field on the site. I was amazed at the amount of paperwork required to comply with the laws governing underground tanks.

My two years of full-time work after high school taught me much about myself, but I realized that I needed a different environment to continue growing. Therefore, from 20xx to 20xx, I attended classes at Mythic County Community College while continuing to work at my father's Exxon station. I was certain I would eventually choose a science-related major, but an event in 20xx showed me that geology was what I wanted to pursue. In 20xx, during the installation of a new, larger underground field tank at the station, an environmental consulting firm tested our soil and found hydrocarbon levels well above the allowable limits. Seventy tons of soil had to be removed from the site and incinerated, at great expense to my father's business. These environmental regulation problems that my father had as a small business owner made me realize that eventually I wanted to use my science background to make it easier on other small business owners to comply with environmental laws.

I transferred to Mythic College as an undergraduate in geology in 20xx, tailoring my courses to environmental geology and hydrogeology. My senior thesis directly reflects my career goals. I am working with the United States Department of Agriculture on a study of riparian zones and their favorable effects on elevated nitrate levels in groundwater due to farm fertilization practices. Meanwhile, I am developing a shallow subsurface geologic map of a riparian zone using seismic refraction techniques. This map will allow a first-order approximation of groundwater flow at the field site and also guide the installation of hydrogeologic equipment by the USDA. I now understand more fully how geophysical methods serve an important role in environmental work, and my senior thesis is a good introduction to this field.

I had initially intended to acquire a position with an environmental consulting firm upon graduation, but discussions with several of my professors confirmed my interest in studying environmental law, which will help me combine my dual interests in science and law and better prepare me for a position with a consulting firm. Thus, I am ready to become a dynamic participant in the University of Pittsburgh Law School this fall, motivated by personal experience, a highly evolved work ethic, and a strong education. Please do give my application every consideration.

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*excerpted from **CHAPTER 5**
PERSONAL STATEMENTS AND
APPLICATION ESSAYS FOR
NATIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS*

A good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in not out.
—Virginia Woolf

Nowhere does a student's ability to communicate well about personal attitudes and accomplishments become more important than in applications for national scholarships. With a mostly even playing field among scholars when it comes to GPA, personal statements and answers to application questions truly do help selectors winnow out the best choices, seeking a tidy match between individual candidates and available opportunities. A Marshall Scholar might not be right for a Truman Scholarship, and vice versa; a returning adult student might be ineligible for many scholarships but perfect for the Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship.

This chapter summarizes ten of the nation's most coveted scholarships, with samples of personal statements and essays following each two-page scholarship description. All of the samples here are strong, and about half of them come from scholarship winners and finalists, culled from about 100 students representing about 20 states. Using the material in this chapter, educate yourself on your target scholarship and study its samples thoroughly, recognizing the rhetorical strategies used as well as how carefully writers match their backgrounds to the scholarship criteria. Visit the scholarship websites and read the profiles of past winners when available, envisioning yourself as a featured student on the website in the following year. Most importantly, be prepared to spend 50+ hours studying, reflecting, and writing as part of the scholarship application process, as winners typically report they do. Whether you win or not, the time will be well spent.

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The Fulbright Scholarship

The Fulbright Scholarship provides funds sufficient to complete a proposed research or study abroad project for one year. Applicants submit written outlines of their research or study plans, which may include a year of graduate study, original dissertation research, a creative or performing arts project, or a teaching assistantship. Because the study is undertaken abroad, applicants must have sufficient maturity, character, and literacy to work within the host country.

The Fulbright Scholarship Selection Criteria

Criteria that selectors use to award Fulbright Scholarships include:

- likelihood of the candidate and project to help advance the program and promote mutual understanding among nations;
- sufficient written and spoken literacy in the host country's language;
- feasibility and specificity of the proposed plan.

A final criterion is the ratio between the number of awards offered in the target country and the number of applications received—i.e., students applying to countries that receive fewer applications have a greater statistical chance of acceptance. Applicants can assess competition statistics and other details for a particular country by consulting the Fulbright website noted on the next page.

Composing a Curriculum Vitae and Statement of Proposed Study

The primary written portions of the Fulbright application are the curriculum vitae (CV) and statement of proposed study. Though most students are used to thinking of a CV as a resume (the terms are often used interchangeably), the Fulbright application defines a CV as a “personal/intellectual biography in narrative form.” The CV is your opportunity to discuss personal motivations, your experience and activities, and future goals. Though your examples should still be concrete, you have the room to reveal your personality—indeed many applicants view this as their chance to let the selectors know them as individually as possible, and they use lightly entertaining anecdotes to set themselves apart from other candidates. In plain terms, the goal is to write a CV that no other person could have written.

In writing the statement of proposed study or research, begin by making sure not to repeat material from other parts of the application unnecessarily, and present

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detail tailored as much as possible to the host country. If you can show that you have performed research on (or, better yet, *in*) the host country already and have made contacts with potential supervisors, you increase your odds of success dramatically. The Fulbright website cautions writers against the use of discipline-specific jargon, and a good rule of thumb is to define any jargon that you do use in context, keeping the focus of your proposal on addressing problems that will provide valuable contributions to society and within your field. Also, practicality and feasibility are principal concerns, so the best applicants provide a timeline, discuss their methodology and goals, and analyze such variables as the host country's cultural and political climate and resources. Finally, of course, you must demonstrate as necessary your linguistic ability as it applies to the country and your proposed plan, especially if your primary goal is a teaching assistantship.

Evaluation of Written Materials from Two Sample Fulbright Applications

The first sample CV and proposal, covering the following five pages, do an excellent job of making the case for the writer's personal and intellectual readiness for the proposed project. The CV focuses on the student's experiences as inspired by his service-oriented grandparents—members of the Mennonite Church. These role models inspired the student to travel to Peru and contact the Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA). As we learn in the student's proposal, he wishes to work on a grassroots project in Peru related to rice farming, and he shows that he has earned the support of the MEDA Consulting Group, underscoring the feasibility of his plan.

The second CV and proposal are also neatly intertwined, and the writer opens the CV with a delightful anecdote about her family puzzling over why a woman would be interested in geological research. The student uses the CV to detail her science background and educational travel, including a month in Thailand, where she plans to do her proposed seismic research. To underscore the urgency of such research, she opens her proposal with a poignant narrative and statistics about the devastating effects of a 1999 earthquake in Central Taiwan. Some readers might have valid concerns over whether the proposal is too technical at times, and whether its sources should be cited internally, yet these essays remain impressive overall. Indeed, the writer was named as a scholarship alternate.

SAMPLE CURRICULUM VITAE FOR THE FULBRIGHT SCHOLARSHIP

Curriculum Vitae for John Lerner

My grandparents have touched many lives: former drug addicts, refugees, neighbors, and my own. They have an uncommon ability to build relationships; they are a paradigm of service—where service is more than what you do and is also defined by who you are.

In my own life, I have aspired to affect people in the manner of my grandparents and others in the Mennonite Church. I still have that aspiration, but my vision has expanded. Prior to attending Mythic College, I pictured myself living in Mythic County near my family and my roots. I grew up attached to the local way of life, working at my family's snack food business, raising crops to earn money, and leading the local Future Farmers of America. During high school, I read the international section of the paper but the people and events seemed a world away. At Mythic College, professors challenged me with realities such as the fate of 500 million people who are chronically malnourished. I began to ask myself, "Why will I have thirty food options at breakfast tomorrow while whole populations around the world will wake up with almost nothing to eat?"

In the summer of 20xx, I traveled to Ecuador, equipped with rudimentary Spanish, a background in international politics and economics, and a desire to meet people, hear their stories, and learn from them. In Ecuador, the effects of a devastating financial crisis in 2000 still lingered. Many people had watched helplessly as banks froze savings accounts while the national currency plummeted, melting the life savings of many Ecuadorians.

Like helplessness, dependency often stems from a lack of opportunities. The children who begged on the streets of Quito depended upon strangers for money. If they were going to eat they had to beg. Reflecting on such matters, as part of my studies I had asked myself, "What is the goal of development?" Through the plight I witnessed among Ecuadorians, I came to define development as building the productive and institutional capacities that give people opportunities to lead lives that they value.

After my travels, I returned to Mythic County in December of 20xx and ate Christmas dinner at my grandparents' farmhouse. I knew that this area was my home, and that my family was the source of my inspiration. I also knew that my passion for studying international development would take me away from Mythic County. But my grandparents had taught me to empathize and act. While aware of problems within

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Mythic County, I had seen much greater need in Latin America. Driven by the values instilled in me, I contacted Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) to work on a development project.

In June of 20xx, I traveled to Peru to assist with an innovative approach to agriculture lending pioneered by MEDA. While working for MEDA, I assessed a microcredit project involving rice farmers. The experience impressed upon me the value of a grassroots understanding as well as the importance of sound macro-level policies. Tariff rates, financial regulations, and public infrastructure plans could mean the difference between the project's success or failure. I left Peru convinced that sound trade and development policies could profoundly affect people's lives. Shaping macro-level policies became my goal.

With this goal in mind, I hope to pursue a law degree and a Master of Public Policy with an emphasis in international development. These degrees will give me the tools to craft and analyze development policy. I will use my experiences and education to hope to shape such policies in Latin America. Later, I plan to teach development studies at the university level.

SAMPLE STATEMENT OF PROPOSED STUDY FOR THE FULBRIGHT SCHOLARSHIP

John Lerner
Study Proposal—Peru
Economic Development

Through my Fulbright independent research project I hope to better understand the production decisions made by Peruvian rice farmers in northern Peru. On what factors do farmers base their decisions to enter, to continue, or to exit rice farming? On what factors do farmers base their specific production decisions, i.e. how much rice to plant? Can accepted microeconomic theory explain these decisions or is another explanation needed? How do cultural or socioeconomic factors influence the decision-making process of these farmers? Finally, how should the answers to these questions affect agriculture development policy in Peru? Should the Peruvian government use the new state-run Agro Banco to subsidize rice farmers whom the formal capital markets ignore?

Understanding production decisions of small-scale farmers requires an understanding of the context in which they operate. Therefore, I will focus the first part of my project on understanding this context. One critical consideration is assessing the current trade, investment, and agriculture policies, such as the Agriculture Financial Rescue bill (RFA), that affect small-scale producers. Other important context issues include the production and price trends in the Peruvian rice market and the major international and domestic players in that market.

Developing a grassroots understanding of small-scale rice farming is both timely and necessary. It is timely because it complements current development organization trends. The Bagua Grande microcredit project, which I was involved with this year, is part of a larger shift in focus of development organizations that has occurred in the last ten years. Popularized by the success of the Grameen Bank, microcredit lending has boomed. The latest trend within microcredit lending is small-scale agriculture. This trend is popular among small development organizations as well as large agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). In fact, USAID funded the Bagua Grande project as part of its multi-million dollar poverty alleviation project in Peru known as Project PRA.

Understanding small-scale agriculture is crucial in addressing poverty in Peru. According to the Peruvian Institute of Statistics and Information (INEI), the rural poverty rate was 35% higher than urban poverty rate in 2002. Child malnutrition and under five mortality are twice as high in rural areas compared to urban areas. Furthermore, INEI data show

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that among rural populations, small-scale farmers are the most vulnerable to rapid changes in income.

The policy context in which small-scale rice farmers operate has changed dramatically in the last fifteen years. In the early 1990s, Peruvian officials adopted a more market-oriented agriculture policy, reducing import restrictions on agriculture goods and dissolving the state-run agriculture commercialization companies. In 1992, Banco Agrario, which subsidized the agriculture sector, was eliminated. As the Peruvian Ministry of Agriculture Strategic Plan states, these policy changes should cause a reorientation in the agriculture sector that reflects the new market conditions. The Strategic Plan confirms, however, that such reorientation has been slow, if not imperceptible. A 1994 Peruvian census found that the majority of Peruvian farmers did not consider prices as the most important signal in deciding what crop to plant. If farmers are not following price signals, what signals are they following?

My supporting institution, Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) Consulting Group Peru, has a wealth of experience working in the Peruvian rice industry. MEDA Consulting Group Peru offers both invaluable contacts and industry-specific knowledge that will facilitate my investigation. I have personally met with Sonia Dominguez, the MEDA Consulting Group Peru country manager, and she has offered her organization's support to me. Further, my previous study abroad experiences in Chile and Ecuador and my ten-week internship in Peru have allowed me to develop my Spanish speaking and writing skills, making this project feasible from a language and cultural awareness standpoint.

I will conduct most of my research in the coastal city of Chiclayo, the center of the rice industry in northern Peru. Much of the rice from northern Peru is taken to Chiclayo where it is milled and distributed to regional or national markets. Farmers from a wide region accompany their crop to the mill where they oversee its sale. Two of these mills, Molino Las Delicias and Molino Tropical, have worked directly with my supporting institution in a rice microcredit project in the region. As a result, Chiclayo offers the most promising opportunities for me to both research the rice industry and to conduct surveys.

Surveys obtained at mills in Chiclayo will be supported by surveys obtained at local input suppliers in towns with a large rice industry such as Bagua Grande, Bagua Chica, Jaen, Moyobamaba, and Picota. MEDA has worked directly with input suppliers in Bagua Grande and Picota and can offer contacts in those towns. Traveling to smaller

towns will permit me to access more small-scale farmers who sell their rice to intermediaries instead of directly to a mill, and help me understand how they make these decisions.

Through this Fulbright project I can further develop my ability to engage in cultural exchange. As I learned while working for MEDA, surveying farmers is difficult. The surveyor must learn how to earn the cooperation of strangers by starting the conversation appropriately and by putting the person being surveyed at ease. When someone feels comfortable in a conversation they will more fully express their opinions, and they will probably also diverge into other issues as if they were talking to an acquaintance.

Surveying rice farmers in Peru will also give me an invaluable grassroots perspective on development issues. This understanding of how individuals respond to macro-level policies is vital to my career goal of working in international development policy. Upon returning from this Fulbright project, I plan to enroll in a Juris Doctorate and Master in Public Policy joint degree program. In both the J.D. and M.P.P programs I will focus on trade and development issues.

This project will also benefit development organizations that operate agriculture projects in the region. MEDA Consulting Group Peru has expressed interest in my findings. I will also offer my study to the many development organizations working in the region, including those that operate the Economic Services Centers as part of USAID's Project PRA. USAID has plans to continue funding development organizations in the region as part of its Economic Growth, Alternative Development, and Peru-Ecuador Border Region Development programs.

I plan on leaving for Chiclayo in early August of 20xx. I will spend the first month researching the rice industry of the region by gathering data from the regional agriculture offices, mill contacts, and contacts in rural credit institutions. In the following three months, I will survey farmers at mills in Chiclayo. To supplement those surveys, I will use months 5 and 6 to conduct surveys of farmers who visit agriculture input supply stores in towns such as Bagua, Jaen, Picota, and Piura in Northern Peru. Finally, I will use months 7 and 8 to analyze the data obtained from the surveys, finish a formal paper on the entire research project, and disseminate my findings to interested development organizations.

SAMPLE CURRICULUM VITAE FOR THE FULBRIGHT SCHOLARSHIP

Curriculum Vitae for Janet Lerner

I decided that I wanted to be a scientist while I was still in elementary school, but even in high school where I was praised for my academic successes, my relatives were still against the whole idea. My grandma still asks me every Christmas what my major is and once I start telling her about earthquakes and mountain formation, she quickly changes the subject. Coming from a small town in Mythic County and being only the second person on either side of my family to attend college, it has been an ongoing issue to convince my family that a person, let alone a woman, can make a living doing geologic research.

As a freshman at Mythic University, I was accepted for a research assistantship designed for incoming freshman women. Through this program I worked with a Mythic University geochemistry professor on the sequestration of pollutants in aquifers. Going into the program, I expected merely to be washing lab equipment and capping bottles, but instead I got to make solutions, run pH experiments and learn how to use spectroscopy instruments. By my sophomore year, I was running samples and interpreting data. It was through this experience that I learned a valuable lesson: opportunities are endless if one is prepared for them.

The spring of my sophomore year I applied for a research course that required me to learn to scuba dive. Through this course I was certified as a PADI open water diver and was able to go to the island of San Salvador in the Bahamas. In San Salvador I was part of a team that conducted research on the island's coral reefs, which involved surveying them for disease and damage, through a program called Reef Check. That summer I also received a scholarship through Mythic University's Biogeochemical Research Initiative for Education to continue the geochemistry research I started as a freshman. Later that summer I left for a semester abroad at the University of Western Australia in Perth, Australia. Before returning home, I visited Thailand for over a month to satisfy my curiosity about Asian cultures and to obtain my advanced and rescue diver certifications.

To say the least, my study abroad experience dramatically changed my life. I had never really been away from home for very long at one time other than college, but even there I was only an hour away from home and had close friends who also attend Mythic University. Being in Australia taught me the true meaning of independence and gave me a new sense of confidence. In addition, I gained an international perspective on many issues that I had never considered before. My experience in Thailand opened my eyes

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to many misconceptions I had about Asian people, and it gave me a new appreciation for the term “culture.”

The spring semester of my junior year I was accepted into a collaborative research class in which we began to prepare an online geology course for Mythic University’s world campus classroom. In the summer we spent three weeks in many of the southwestern US national parks producing short educational films to be used in the class. This fall we are editing the films and giving presentations about our experiences with the class. As I write this I am in the first semester of my senior year and I have just started my thesis research with a grant from the National Science Foundation. My work investigates uplift in the Himalayan Plateau.

Since studying abroad, I have gained a more compassionate outlook on life, which has caused me to re-evaluate my career choices. For a short time I considered changing fields to a major that would be more beneficial to humanity and thus more self-fulfilling. But after contemplating the issue for some time, I decided that I can make a difference in the world with any career choice. Now, I am devoted to using my geologic knowledge for the betterment of humanity. This is the main reason why I have chosen a project dealing with earthquakes in Taiwan. The research is not just about geology but about advances that will help to save people’s lives.

In addition, I am very excited to learn more about the Asian culture, which I have taken a special interest in since my short visit to Thailand. I believe I am highly qualified to conduct my proposed research. Although my research interactions will be done in English, I have started Chinese lessons this fall at Mythic University to make my experience in Taiwan even more meaningful. I will have completed Chinese II by the time I graduate and I hope to take personal language lessons over the summer before traveling to Taiwan. After this experience I plan to obtain my PhD at a geology school in California, integrating the knowledge I obtained in Taiwan to studies on fault zones in the United States.

SAMPLE STATEMENT OF PROPOSED STUDY FOR THE FULBRIGHT SCHOLARSHIP

Janet Lerner
Study Proposal—Taiwan
Earthquake Dynamics

At 1:47 in the morning, September 21, 1999, the town of Chi Chi in Nantou County, Central Taiwan began to shake violently. A release of built-up stress deep in the Earth caused the eastern side of the Chelongpu Fault to rise, rupturing the surface for an approximate extent of 86 km and creating a lasting offset upon the surface of the Earth.

The earthquake caused buildings to tumble and triggered landslides in some areas. A report from the Central Weather Bureau in Taipei reported a death toll of 2,333 and 10,002 injured. Over 46,700 buildings totally collapsed with 100,000 people left homeless. The initial tremor was followed by over 10,000 aftershocks, five of which were termed moderate earthquakes which caused minor death and damage. Direct and indirect losses associated with the Chi Chi earthquake totals 30 billion dollars. The Chi Chi earthquake was a catastrophe for the Taiwanese people and the largest recorded earthquake ever to hit the island.

I am interested in studying earthquake dynamics, and Taiwan is an excellent place in which to do so. Taiwan is an area of active mountain building and it lies along the boundary between the Luzon arc of the Philippine Sea Plate and the Chinese continental margin, where plate collision is occurring. The Chelongpu Fault in particular offers a special opportunity to study faults. Not only is it a major event that is geologically recent but the fault is well-mapped and relatively well-known. The Chi Chi earthquake is unique in that it provided a multitude of modern digital data for seismologist and earthquake engineers. These data can be attributed to an extensive seismic instrumentation program that had been successfully implemented in Taiwan three years prior to the Chi Chi Earthquake. In addition, recent drilling along the fault is allowing access to fault rocks at depths where rupturing initiates.

By studying the physical characteristics of the rocks, one can gain a better understanding of fault development and ultimately come one step closer to the earthquake mechanism. As motion on a fault commences, the rocks can either experience velocity strengthening, where an increase in slip rate makes further slip less probable, or velocity weakening, where an increase in slip rate makes the rocks weaker. Velocity strengthening and weakening are primarily a function of material properties of the rock bodies surrounding the fault. These properties of the fault zone can mean the difference between a steady creep in which fault blocks move without seismic slip, or a major earthshaking event

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like that of the Chi Chi earthquake. The faulted rocks of the Chelongpu Fault are especially valuable to geologists in that they record the history and evolution of deformation caused by the Chi Chi Earthquake.

Previous studies have determined the architectural pattern of major thrusting fault zones as asymmetric, meaning the damaged zone is thicker above the fault core than below. In addition, the fracture density tends to increase with depth, reaching a maximum at the fault core and abruptly decreasing thereafter. Observations such as these have been made on previous fault zones, but solid research on fault dynamics and how it relates to this architecture is lacking. Consequently, my research will focus on the asymmetric development of fault zone evolution.

With the help of Mythic University structural geologist Dr. John Teacher, I have been in contact with Dr. Yue-Gau Chen, Professor of Geosciences at the National Taiwan University, who organizes Sino-American collaborations in Taiwan, and Dr. En-Chao Yeh from the Deep Sea Research Department at the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology (JAMSTEC). JAMSTEC will be receiving drill cores from the Taiwan Continental Drilling Project (TCDP), an international effort dedicated to drilling the Chelongpu Fault zone. Dr. En-Chao Yeh is responsible for evaluation of drill cores at JAMSTEC and will be participating in a series of micro-scale and meso-scale analyses that will be done on the cores. These analyses include structural, physical property, rock mechanic, and geochemical examinations of the fault zone rocks. Each of these examinations is assigned to a separate group of researchers, and I have been given an invitation from Dr. En-Chao Yeh to work with him on the structural examinations and an invitation from Dr. Yue-Gau Chen to be associated with the National Taiwan University in Taipei, which would culminate in a master's degree in geology.

There are five tests that I would be performing on the drill cores, as follows:

- 1). Core observations will be done to characterize the meso-scale structures and textures on the cores and on scanned images. These structures can be associated with individual earthquake events to give an idea of how and to what extent the fault moved during each event and to decide a development direction: upwards, stationary or downwards.
- 2). Thin sections will be taken to look at micro-scale structures and textures under an optical microscope. Micro-structures can be used to develop cross-cutting relationships and allow for a better understanding of development sequence of the fault zone.

- 3). The Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) will allow for examination of even smaller features including mineral phases and micro-textures.
- 4). Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM) will be used to identify the detailed atomic structures and the presence of glass which is only produced under high pressure conditions.
- 5). Microscopic X-ray Computed Tomography (Micro-XCT) will be used to determine the porosity, permeability and fluid dynamics across the fault zone.

These analyses would be conducted for a half year of study and would be followed up by a half year of interpretation of results, comparison to other studies, and linking to the bigger picture through collaboration with other drill hole examiners. It is expected that this work will result in a comprehensive overview of the asymmetric architecture of the Chelongpu Fault. Through characterization of a single fault where earthquake dynamics are well-known, principles will be generated that can be applied to other areas of potential seismic hazard.

My proposed project (which would start in September 20xx and end in June 20xx) is an excellent opportunity for geology to serve as a medium whereby intellectual exchange can be the basis for cultural connection. Earthquakes are an ever-present danger in Taiwan and the United States (particularly the San Andreas Fault area); a collaboration on research is not only about technology but about uniting powers to save lives and resources. Although both countries already have extensive programs that focus on earthquake research, it is only through combined efforts that the most rapid advances can be made. Furthermore, this opportunity has the potential to greatly enhance my professional career as a geologist. Not only is this project at the forefront of structural geology studies, but it will give me an international perspective on geologic and cultural issues alike. Finally, the project is an especially unique opportunity for a woman in a male-dominated field.

Sources:

Personal Communication: Dr. John Teacher and Dr. Yue-Gau Chen.

Statistics taken from: California's Partnership 2000 Conference website at:

<http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Part2000/Events/00Conf/Presentations/EarthQks.htm>.